

Albert Camus: A Prophetic Voice

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by

Alexander M. DeTillio

The Ohio State University

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Part 1: Tracing Camus' Thought from Absurdity to Pacifism

In 1947 Albert Camus published the collection of essays *Ni Victimes, Ni Bourreaux*,¹ which stands as a statement of direct, reasoned pacifism in a time of total war. Camus' ideas do not rely on any religious principles or purely utilitarian ends, but instead are a direct response to the times in which he found himself. This work also represents another step in his thought, which most concisely began with his evocation of *L'absurde*² in his philosophic essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*³ and his literary exploration of it in *L'Étranger*,⁴ both published in 1942. For Camus, the reasons to “reflect on murder and to make a choice”⁵ were not dictated from above nor as direct results of systematic reason, but stemmed from a time when the “future [is] materially closed” to humanity and the need for lucidity as well as humanistic reason were of the utmost importance.⁶ What he saw in the systematic violence of World War II and the other military conflicts of the time, was a future plagued by despair and murder—a closed off, paralyzed future. If, Camus argues, “Life has no validity unless it can project itself toward a future,”⁷ then a closed off future is no future at all—it has no possibility: it “is a dog’s life.”⁸ Camus’ conclusion then is a quasi-utopian plea for peace in order that the future be open to all peoples, and this future starts with the unwillingness to legitimize murder. It is in this sense that Camus stands in a long line of pacifism—yet his reasons are not rooted in the traditional pacifist argument. It is my contention that his logic speaks to those convinced neither by the religious nor by the utilitarian calls for

¹ “Neither Victims Nor Executioners.”

² “The Absurd.”

³ *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

⁴ *The Stranger* or *The Outsider*.

⁵ *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior To Murder*, 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

pacifism, but rather to those who have, as an essential conduit of their being, a general care for each individual's *possibility* and inherent humanity that is more foundational than the religious and utilitarian reasons—a care based on a primal aspect of humanness prior to religious and philosophic concerns. The justifications for this worldview originate in his exploration of The Absurd, a foundational idea from which he can build up his thoughts. Camus' call for peace then does not rely on any sort of metaphysical or historical justification that is absolutely or neatly rooted in a system or program of thought, but instead is simply anchored in the concepts of lucidity, simplicity, and humanism—traits of a life lived in an “absurd” condition.

Thus, the statements in *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*,⁹ while standing firm on their own, are reflections of and conclusions drawn from the worldview and experience of The Absurd, which itself is, while being a philosophical position, largely based on Camus' own contemplation and experience of a life lived in defiance of absolute and dualistic thinking and the subsequent quest for a mean that does not degrade the basic human condition. For Camus, the pragmatic refusal to legitimize murder stems from the same reason behind refusing to take the metaphysical leap to belief in God; it stems from the want for, above all else, a completely human-based lucidity,¹⁰ happiness, and possibility.

The universe that Albert Camus created through fiction (including plays, short stories, and novels), essays and philosophy, and a far-reaching and involved journalistic career, is polemical. On the one hand the want for happiness, meaning, and an energetic, transcendent life is of the utmost importance. There's an extreme desire for a Nietzschean-like power and release

⁹ After their initial introduction, French titles and terms will be used in English.

¹⁰ Which is from the French term *lucidité*, meaning “brightness” and from the Latin *lucidity* (from *lucidus*) meaning “intellectual clarity.” Therefore, when lucidity is used in this essay, and how I take Camus to use it, the meaning will rest on an intellectual clarity that stands in the revealed light of that which is. This term's importance will become more apparent as the essay progresses.

of energy in all of his work—to will, in the midst of a seemingly chaotic universe, oneself to *live* and *experience* a life worth living completely and wholly for and from oneself. This desire for clarity, meaning, and existential vitality is emblematic of the nostalgia that he saw at the heart of being; the nostalgia for a “lost homeland” of unity and truthfulness that permeates the darkest corners of mankind and his condition, no matter his present situation. The landscape of nostalgia for a more certain and unified time that has passed, in which all of Camus’ work is steeped, is the result of a whole host of experiences of peaceful, un-tempered sunshine and beautiful beaches that characterized his poor but physically rich childhood. This feeling of nostalgia for his lost childhood manifests in a revolt, or “will to happiness,” against the modernist climate of alienation, depravity, violence, and despair that characterizes the early twentieth century. This revolt runs through all of his work and is in part a reflection of his upbringing.

Growing up a *Pied-Noir*¹¹ in Algeria, Camus saw the beaches and terrain of his homeland as emblematic of light and happiness. As he writes in *Le Premier Homme*,¹²

The Sea was gentle and warm, the sun fell lightly on their soaked heads, and the glory of the light filled their young bodies with a joy that made them cry out incessantly. They reigned over life and over the sea, and, like nobles certain that their riches were limitless, they heedlessly consumed the most gorgeous of this world’s offerings.¹³

He was a physically strong young man, and despite his material lacking, he played football and swam regularly. The feelings of nostalgia that stem from his upbringing—strengthened upon his future exile to mainland Europe—haunt his philosophy continually. In the first entry in his published journals, he writes, “What I mean is this: that one can, with no romanticism, feel

¹¹ “French-colonial.”

¹² *The First Man*.

¹³ *The First Man*, 51.

nostalgic for lost poverty. A certain number of years lived without money are enough to create a whole sensibility.”¹⁴ But the happiness of youth and lightness that Camus felt in Algeria, amongst the simple people of the land and the beauty of the Mediterranean sea, was soon to be overshadowed by doubt, sickness, and war.

Thus, on the other pole of his thought lies an intense and at times pessimistic realism for the darkly disturbing plight of the modern human that seems insurmountable: man wants his nostalgia to be confirmed by his reality but finds no direct answers; he wants to live in the sunshine and be happy but is tormented by thoughts of suicide, of worthlessness, of chaos and night. He desires peace and autonomy, yet is swept up by a history full of violence, “herd mentality” (as Nietzsche called it), and impersonal statistics. What’s more, man desires his feelings to be met by a positive confirmation and meaningful affirmation in reality—yet does not find one. This pole of his thought is directly related to the harsh reality that struck Camus at seventeen when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, as well as the worldwide outbreaks of war, sickness, and mass consumption which led to this alienation and disparity. The pessimism he saw in the modern condition was also being felt and discussed by other contemporaries like Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux, and this general feeling was present in many of the other writers of the time.

This shifting from light to dark, from the beauty and openness of the beaches and terraces of his youth to the strangeness and calamity of sickness, world war, and alienation of adulthood would haunt and fuel Camus his whole life and provide the backdrop for his whole philosophy. In this situation we find Camus’ biographical analogy to the philosophical problem of The Absurd; the dualistic poles of thought that Camus will want to avoid represent the pain he felt in being torn from the lightness of youth to the darkness of experience. Instead, he wants us stay in

¹⁴ *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 3.

between, resolute in our conviction to try and grasp and understand both—while not negating the reality of each side.

As Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits”;¹⁵ therefore, the philosophy of The Absurd that underlies his essay on pacifism is a structure for a worldview of moderation and limits in light of extremes. It represents a humanistic answer to the loss of religious and objective belief that permeated Western civilization during Camus’ life, and it can provide a foundational reason for a pacifistic response to a world on fire. Perhaps that answer can apply similarly to our world today when considering such recent events as the terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere, 9/11, the wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and the subsequent, extremist calls for violence, racism, and exclusivism.

Camus lived with a heightened realization of this plight and the extreme reactions it caused and his ultimate goal was *to find a humanistic mean between extremes, one which remained lucid in the face of irrational calls for violence and war and one which validated the human experience in all its forms through rational dialogue, experience, and possibility*. This mean would not negate the extremes, but embrace them as parts of the whole picture—a picture that advocates peace as the only logical response to total war. Importantly, this tension between extremes is to come together and play out *within the human experience and the moral choices that each person makes—moral choices that can only conclude in the refusal to legitimize murder*. Therefore, according to Camus, though absolute unity and peace cannot be found in the outside world, in the individual human being it can be created and sustained through individual actions. Life is then given a subjective meaning that is not wholly dependent on the outside world and each person conforming to it, but springs forth from the authentic actions of the individual in her time and space towards the outside world which refuses to conclusively speak.

¹⁵ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49.

The hope is then that as individuals come to this realization, a society will follow suit. From this idea stems Camus' reasons for denouncing violence and murder, and ultimately leads him to claim that "henceforth, the only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions."¹⁶

The continual juxtaposition and tension between reality and individual desire that Camus found in many aspects of existence is properly the *feeling* of The Absurd—for it springs directly from the individual recognizing it—and is the foundational principle that his calls for peace rest upon. Thus, in order to understand his argument, an overview of The Absurd is needed.

"Man does not show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once." – Pascal

Though Camus' idea of The Absurd occurs in numerous places throughout his oeuvre, it is in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that he most coherently presents it. On page one he writes, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."¹⁷ These opening lines provide the general target at which Camus is pointed: figuring out whether life has a meaning and whether or not that meaning offers humanity a reason to live—or dictates death. Camus states that a philosopher must "preach by example" and through *action*; when life and death are on the line, a philosophy of fundamental everydayness that is not shrouded in confusion and is clear and understandable is paramount. Lucidity in understanding is the key. Importantly, existing in and experiencing the world is part of the primary foundation of The Absurd; it is a *philosophy of life*. These are, to Camus, "facts the heart can feel; yet they call for

¹⁶ *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder*, 55.

¹⁷ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 1.

careful study before they become clear to the intellect.”¹⁸ Clarity, consciousness, and unity in the face of existence: these are the desires which Camus wants to understand and which he feels are at the base of all philosophical questions. If man is to go forth in a seemingly godless universe,¹⁹ if he is to be honest and for-himself (as Sartre would put it) in relation to this diagnosis, and if he is to live authentically amongst a complicated world of objects, others, and ideas, the first question to be asked is why he is here. Thus, for Camus, the question of philosophy is not just a question of knowledge, but one of existential wisdom.

But why is this a question of such urgency? What gives it such imminence? After all, to many the questioning attitude is lost; we are a species of routine, day to day coming and going. As Camus writes, “Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time.”²⁰ However one day, upon turning a corner to catch the streetcar or eating a quickly purchased and routine meal, the feeling of the absurdity of man’s plight becomes apparent: “It happens that the stage sets collapse,”²¹ as Camus puts it. Likewise, in the works of Martin Heidegger, we find a similar phenomena, which Heidegger calls “Existenzangst.”²² Upon this realization of individual existence, a *feeling of anxiety* sets in. This is properly the initial feeling of The Absurd. As with

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For immediate context of the issue of God’s existence in Camus’ thought, consider the following entries from his *Notebooks 1935-1942*: “The tragic struggle of the suffering world. Pointlessness of the problem of immortality. We are interested in our destiny, admittedly. But *before* [death], not after” (36). And again, “If they cast everything off, it is for a greater and not for another life” (57). And again, “...but if such a mood does come over me, you know that I have no need of God...” (158). Important to note is the disdain for the question and idea of immortality and God all together, a disdain shared by many other writers in the “Tradition of Humiliated Thought.”

²⁰ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 12-13.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² German for “Existential angst.” This basic idea runs through Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, and many other “existentialist” writers as well.

all feelings, an iceberg of reasons lies beneath; in order that the feeling can be understood for our purposes here, the question must be asked: Why does one feel this way?

It's one thing to state that this feeling conceptually exists, but it's another to actually feel it. Much like love or hate, the concept and the experience of The Absurd have two distinct characters. In a sense, the existence of the feeling of the concept breathes life into the concept, allowing it to come to be and carry subjective weight. The metaphysic present here is akin to Heidegger's reigniting in the twentieth century of the Greek definition of truth, that is, ἀλήθεια, or Alethia, meaning variously "unclosedness," "unconcealedness," or "disclosure."²³ Important to note for both Camus and Heidegger, is the role humans have in this process—we in fact "bring about" the truth through uncovering it. Thus, *through the experience* the concept is disclosed, or comes to be. So while one can have in mind the concept of The Absurd, the feeling requires living with it. Thus, through living and experiencing we come to know; this is a foundational epistemology that defines the whole tradition "of humiliated thought"²⁴ preceding and following Camus, and is the zeitgeist that runs through, behind, and in front of everyone from Plato and the Stoics to Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, to Samuel Beckett and Gabriel Marcel.²⁵ This is in stark contrast to the more passive or purely conceptual idea of truth as through logical analysis or "armchair reasoning." The idea here is to get out of the library and into the lab. In other words, truth is to be disclosed and understood through *experiencing* it; then and only then does it take on meaning, and allow for the possibility of wisdom.

²³ These definitions are taken from *A Greek-English Lexicon* by Henry George Liddell. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes, "Primordially 'truth' means the same as 'Being-disclosive', as a way in which Dasein behaves. From this comes the derivative signification: 'the uncoveredness of entities'" (300).

²⁴ In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, on page 101, he writes, "...I saw them likewise in those princes of humiliated thought whose suicides I was later able to witness...."

²⁵ Many essays on this tradition of thought have been written linking these and many other writers together; specifically important to many of the basic ideas in this essay are Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, Bernard Murchland's *The Arrow That Flies by Day*, and Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*. See reference page for more.

This idea of experiencing, feeling, and coming to the place of “wisdom,” is one western thought has agonized over for thousands of years. For example, when we read the Book of Job, we question Job’s incessant pleading, and we may perhaps ultimately conclude that the time and effort he puts into his case is for naught, for no conclusive answer comes: what is all this pain and contemplation for if no reasoned and logical conclusion is stated? But perhaps in the quest the “answer” appears in the experience and general becoming of Job as a person. The experience engenders a flow of thinking through his mind, and this conscious contemplation, fused with passion, germinates into a feeling and coalesces in wisdom. The Jobian case provides an example *par excellence* of the perennial aspect of The Absurd. As this essay develops, Job’s case will become apparent, and will be a key theme in Part Two. Likewise then, for the Camusian seeker who probes the dark alleyways of existence, who considers and lives out the alienated self, The Absurd begins to take shape. Camus knew that story telling and art were the spaces in which to further show this conscious awareness of the human condition, hence his illustrious career as a writer of fiction.

So while there is this tension and feeling of incompleteness, there is also the understanding that no complete certainty will provide for and quench the thirst for existence and meaning; ultimately, one cannot reside wholly within an extreme pole and neither can one oscillate between the dichotomies of each side of the question. Living for an absolute certainty negates the other possibilities—possibilities that are a part of the human experience. Thus, following one extreme of Camus’ thought, running head-long into life with a reckless abandon that is assured by an absolute truth or meaning, while providing an outlet for being and seemingly providing existential certitude, lacks a realistic foundation. Simply put, the reckless student of hedonistic frontloading, who seeks “the good” in only pleasure and the lack of pain, is

left with only a partial understanding and will ultimately be completely isolated from her peers and the reality of the world around her. Likewise, the assured preacher misses all the advantages of doubt and despair through a foundation that does not have space for cracks. Camus does recognize, however, our want for this certainty. For Camus, this desire is akin to the nostalgia which he felt increasingly with age of youth and lightness, of "...the bay, the sun, the red and white games on the seaweed terraces, the flowers and sports stadiums, the cool-legged girls";²⁶ again, in his earliest Notebooks, "Every minute of life carries with it its miraculous value, and its face of eternal youth."²⁷ Youth was, for Camus, despite his lack of material wealth, representative of vitality and certainty, and he longed for it—even while describing the harrowing and crushing episodes of starvation and brutality that surrounded the city of Algiers, where he soaked in the sun of youth. He recognized the importance of the hedonistic youth who has this certainty, while also recognizing its ultimate impossibility of giving life transcendent meaning. Thus, how could one honestly and completely indulge in such nostalgic, youthful feelings when the reality of the world in general was much darker? Not only is this a basic and timeless tenet of coming of age, but it has become so important to the modern condition that it dictates deeper thought, and hopefully some sort of significance and exegesis can come from questioning its validity. Likewise, and on the other extreme, the somber realist who has no pleasures will not find joy, happiness, or truth in a world besieged by pestilence, death, and war. Death is the end of possibility and reality carries this tragedy with it, void of any obvious answers as to why and lacking any obvious transcendence, and in direct conflict with the desire for happiness and youth that humans have.

²⁶ Originally from "Summer in Algiers", here from *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 142.

²⁷ *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 10.

As an example of this juxtaposition of extremes, consider entries from March, 1940 in Camus' Notebooks '35-'42:

What does this sudden awakening mean, in this dark room, with the sounds of a city that has suddenly become foreign to me? And everything is foreign to me, everything, without a single person who belongs to me, with no hiding place to heal this wound. What am I doing here, what is the point of these smiles and gestures? My home is neither here nor elsewhere. And the world has become merely an unknown landscape where my heart can learn nothing. Foreign—who can know what this word means?

This paragraph presents the somber realist, contemplating the melancholy side. Through this contemplation he comes to an understanding:

Foreign, admit that I find everything strange and foreign.

Now that everything is clear-cut, wait and spare nothing. At least, work in such a way as to achieve both silence and literary creation. Everything else, everything, whatever may happen, is unimportant.

And then, in the next breath:

Trouville. A Plateau, covered with asphodels, facing the sea. Little villas with green or white gates, some buried under tamarisks, a few others bare and surrounded by stones. A slight complaint rises from the sea. But everything, the sun, the slight breeze, the whiteness of the asphodels, the already hard blue of the sky, brings to mind the summer, the gilded youth of its daughters and sunburned sons, passions coming to life, long hours in the sun, the sudden softness of the evenings. What other meaning can we find to our days but this, and the lesson we

draw from this plateau: a birth, a death, and between the two, beauty and melancholy?²⁸

What these entries indicate is the holding of both extremes at the same time. The first extols the feeling of The Absurd: from the sudden darkness to the foreignness and feeling of abandonment, from loneliness and confusion to homelessness, The Absurd takes shape in Camus' mind. As the feeling takes shape, so does the clarity ("everything is clear-cut"), which pushes him to rebel in the form of literary creation. The second part of the entry shows the nostalgia and beauty Camus felt all around him in the natural world; the descriptions of vegetation and wildlife provide the back drop for youth and the pleasure had therein. Together then, "between the two," is life: "beauty and melancholy." Over and over again one gets the idea of these two extremes in Camus' mind.

What this amounts to thus far is that extremes do not speak for the whole of existence: there is a need for moderation, and for *lucid* moderation in a space between the extremes. The idea of The Absurd, according to Camus, points to this moderation and lucidity; it is the waypoint between the extremes, a space with a view of both sides. Camus writes, "I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear."²⁹ Thus, one is to, "Commit yourself completely. Then, show equal strength in accepting both yes and no."³⁰ Camus' brand of intellectual agnosticism is then one of a humble acceptance of one's condition, and ultimately one of an unexpected modesty and humility between poles and extremes.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 169-170.

²⁹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 40.

³⁰ *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 26.

³¹ I say "unexpected" because many of the writers who are dealing with similar issues (like Sartre and Nietzsche) are far more visceral in their agnosticism or atheism (and not just in the religious sense, but towards the everyday as well); Camus' humility and tact is then surprisingly refreshing.

Throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the corresponding fictional works, Camus strives to define, elaborate on, and concretely spell out what The Absurd looks like, how one comes to feel and know it, and what its ramifications are. It is important to recognize where it stems from, both through historical influences on Camus, and how it takes shape in reality. Considering the latter, The Absurd does not merely lie in the objects, happenings, and conflicts that surround the individual; World War II was not in itself absurd, nor was the starvation of thousands of natives in the barren deserts of Northern Africa. Absurdity is not a passive adjective used to describe a situation or an object, nor is it a flippant emotional reaction to an exterior situation. It lies specifically in the *individual human in relation* to these outside situations and objects. As Camus writes, “This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity”;³² again, “... the absurdity springs from a comparison... The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.”³³ The Absurd is relational, dependent, and stems directly from the *human experience* in the world and the acute tension of desires *humans* feel when faced with naked existence.

Camus continues to define absurdity, “If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd.”³⁴ The absurdity of the situation is in the individual man acting irrationally in the face of reality—not in reality itself. According to the biographer Olivier Todd, Camus defined The Absurd as impossibility and a contradiction as well as “to mean ‘contradictory,’ ‘false,’ and ‘unreasonable.’”³⁵ Absurdity is not, however, only descriptive in the semantic sense; it describes the phenomenological reality of existence. *It is a phenomenon in the world born from the world’s relation to humanity.* What this means is that

³² *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

while someone may say “this is absurd” when observing poorly trained Iraqi militants blindly running towards heavily armored, imperial tanks with nothing more than age-old carbine rifles, the situation does not just illuminate The Absurd on a non-human, “metaphysical” plane, but also in descriptive reality. Of course these militants are being irrational, however their irrationality, while indeed “unreasonable,” is not “metaphysically absurd.” The “metaphysical” sense of absurdity lies in the human cry for absolute meaning and the blank response given by the universe. It is a lack of transcendence between man and the heavens; the two parts, which straddle the phenomenological and the metaphysical, are the human feeling and reaction to the silence of the non-human. As Meursault in *The Stranger* finally feels, “the tender indifference of the world”³⁶ becomes clear in this middle space between the phenomenological and metaphysical. This realization is that of silence in the face of transcendental meaning; it is the failure of the metaphysical to become the phenomenological. This is the void of Absurdity.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes about “The Absurd Man,” who, conscious of his condition, embodies it. Who or what is this “Absurd Man,” who is supposed to live these truths? What does he do and how does he live out his condition? According to Camus, he is “He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal.”³⁷ He is the combination of “a life without appeal,” that is, without committing what Camus calls “philosophical suicide,”³⁸ with also being able to accept his condition: one of limits. This “philosophical suicide” is taking the leap towards belief in a metaphysical absolute or certainty; this leap, according to Camus, would negate The

³⁶ But why tender? As this essay develops further, the positive aspects of The Absurd will become apparent, and will take center stage in Part Two.

³⁷ Ibid., 66.

³⁸ See the Chapter “Philosophical Suicide” from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, especially the sections on Kierkegaard and Leo Chestov, pages 32-50. Later in *The Myth*, he sums it up: “The Leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal... all these screens hide the absurd” (91).

Absurd, for it defies the limits of the human condition by its very assenting to one extreme. By Kierkegaard taking the Leap of Faith, “he does not maintain the equilibrium.”³⁹ Again, we see the denial of extremes, the dislike for dualisms and black and white answers; instead of “this or that,” choose “neither this nor that.” Preserving the choice of human freedom at its most primitive and having lucidity about this freedom in the sobering realization of existence—this is the goal.

If The Absurd Man’s limits then define him, his life from birth to death is the phenomenal space in which he has to operate; “...this shimmering of phenomenological thought will illustrate the absurd reasoning better than anything else.”⁴⁰ Eternity and the space before or after his life have no *specific* meaning for him, though his past and future do co-inhere in him. In this sense, each man is then “The First Man,” inasmuch as his temporal existence is that which defines his essence. This idea is a main theme of Camus’ final and incomplete novel, *The First Man*; as Jacques Cormery searches for the remnants of his genealogical past, from his father’s story to the land from which he was born, he comes to realize that each man is, in a sense, “The First Man.” Tied to Camus’ insistence on the phenomenological, the hillsides and country (the very earth and dirt itself), there is the statement from 1 Corinthians 15:47: “The First Man was of the dust of the earth, The Second Man from heaven.” In a life with no appeal to heaven, there is only The First Man from the dust of the earth. Hence, Genesis 3:19: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Each man is the first in that each comes from dust, and from dust each shall return; there is no existential appeal to the time before or after existence: it is a contradiction in terms. Camus wishes to acknowledge this primal aspect of being, and from here

³⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

and only here develop a method. In essence, Camus' whole system can be seen as giving a meaning and morality for humans before the second man (whose coming we cannot be sure of anyway);⁴¹ lucidity springs forth in the space between the confusion of the first coming and the second: instead of consenting to faith in a time that may never come, Camus calls us to be men and women of the here and now.

However the past is a thing that can accompany us and the past defines us in some way. This move towards the prospective, while acknowledging our past and the weight it bears upon us, is the entirely *human* acknowledgement of fate and destiny; it is accepting a future state that is not dependent on eternity, but merely each person's place in a finite scale of time. Imagine this as moving between the phenomenological limits of existence—birth and death—while not accepting them either as the foundational markers that constrain us, and at the same time not consenting to the metaphysical limits—belief or disbelief—as dictating the value of that time.

So far I have talked about The Absurd in a logically informal way. Consider the following as an attempt at a systematic “logic of Absurdity.”

From the allowance for limits (we'll call this *L*), and the desire of man to be free from such limits (*F*), comes the recognition of the phenomenon of The Absurd (*A*), with a key factor being mortality (or time, so *T*) and then the desire to have a further possibility (*P*), ending in the hope for a springing forth of purpose and meaning (*M*).

This formula does not negate condition by truncating, eliminating, or only partly accepting the predicates, but instead accepts them and proposes a course of action that allows for the mind to stay lucid and continually acknowledge the predicates without making a move to

⁴¹ Consider Matthew 24:36: “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

eliminate them. In other words, there is no ejection of the assumptions; all the premises and possibilities must remain. What this amounts to is an authentic, wholly subjective and lucid acceptance of condition, while at the same time dictating the need for future possibility, from which then meaning can spring. The “logic” goes as follows:

Suppose L (Limits) and F (Desire to transcend limits) as true based on the above.

When combined, $L \wedge F \rightarrow A$, where A is a descriptive term for the human condition i.e.

$$A \rightarrow \exists \vdash \perp = \text{“Existence is Absurd”}^{42}$$

When positing any logical statement (like that of the above), in order to show it to be valid there must be a proof. However, when considering the part of the above that stresses the nature of The Absurd to be felt, and in light of what is to follow, I here posit that “The Absurd Logic” cannot be proven via conceptual or “deductive” logic: the logical statement fails. But why is this? In order to show a proof, the system by which the proof is to follow from must be “sound” and “complete,” in other words it proves formulas to be valid only in respect to the specific interpretation laid down by the logical system. That is, all proofs show arguments to be valid and are thus “sound”; they are then “complete” when you can prove any valid argument expressible in the language. The problem we face with The Absurd, however, is that humans cannot come to this place of certainty and trust in a system that does not corroborate with natural tendencies and dispositions. To state this another way, the system of deductive logic, while theoretically “sound” and “complete,” does not equate with the epistemic limits on existence here posited. Though this epistemology will be discussed at length later, I mention it now for sake of argument.

⁴² Where \wedge means “and,” \rightarrow means “if then” or “implies,” A means “Absurd” (Here defined), \exists means “Existence,” \vdash means “is provable from,” and \perp means “contradiction” or “absurdity.”

More importantly than these *epistemic* limits, however, are the *normative* limits Camus places on reasoning. Here I evoke the Nietzschean-inspired question, “At what cost?” This refers to the question of the normative limit of cost to the individual human and her essential nature: at what cost do we reduce humans to logical machines? At the cost of their creativity. At the cost of imagination. From where do these normative claims come? Without question, we must continue to appeal to what it means to live a human life—the “essence” of being human. This is the quest for “The First Man,” as discussed above. Each man has his own essence that is to be uncovered through existence, which will come to define his normative limits. What this points to is that, contrary to Sartre’s complete denial of essence, Camus acknowledges it.⁴³ Human existence is then, on a micro scale, from the dust of the earth, which, reaching our gaze farther back, is from the stars; the cosmic existence of man is then on the macro scale. Our essence reaches back through time to the “lost paradise” of our genealogical past, from father to grandfather and so on.

So where does this leave us with our first statement ($\exists : \perp$)? Instead of using deductive logic—a system that does not fit within the epistemic and normative limits here posited, while also not resonating with the very essence of human existence—we must look for an aesthetic justification. Thus, we circle back to the feeling for which the deductive system cannot account. This is the legacy Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s “Underground Man” teaches us in *Notes from the Underground*, in which he rails against the cold system of rationality and reason engulfing the 19th century.⁴⁴ For Dostoyevsky, the emblem of this will to reason was The Crystal Palace,

⁴³ In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre writes, “What they [“Existentialists”] have in common is simply the belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure” (20). Camus says in an interview, “No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked... the only book of ideas I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was directed against so-called existentialist philosophers” (“Three Interviews,” from *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 345).

⁴⁴ The Camus-Dostoyevsky connection is incredibly strong: Camus writes on Dostoyevsky throughout his life. Notably, he published a dramatic interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*. Both thinkers were also very concerned with nihilism and its growing anchor in modern society.

located first in Hyde Park, London, and later next to Sydenham Hill. This palace was built to house the Great Exhibition of 1851, where thousands of people would gather to observe displays showcasing the latest technological advances of The Industrial Revolution. The Crystal Palace becomes the main target for Dostoyevsky's anti-hero. Through this despicable, malady-ridden man of forty, Dostoyevsky vents his frustrations with unbridled reason and power. What this avenue teaches us is that reason can only be trusted so far: it cannot be, as the logician wants, "truth preserving" when applied to the problem of The Absurd (or some other ideas of existence), for it cannot account for the *existential feeling* therein. Hence, the need for another justification.

To summarize then, contrary to the logicians' need to simplify the equation and discharge the assumptions, as reflected in the very principles of deductive logic, Camus' call for lucidity and reason dictates that *we cannot simplify the equation any more, for we must accept and keep in mind every variable at all times*. Nothing in our condition, nor that from which follows, can be negated if we are to stay lucid throughout. And importantly, a premise of that condition is a feeling—one which deductive logic cannot (and refuses to) account for. Thus, not only does The Absurd dictate choosing neither yes nor no, but perhaps dictates another system of justification altogether: an artistic one. For now, allow the logic and conversation above to represent a schema for what is to follow.

According to Camus, instead of dictating an amorality, as in the case of Gide's protagonist Michel in *L'Immoraliste*,⁴⁵ or a form of nihilism, like Dostoyevsky's "that would mean that now all things are lawful, that one may do anything one likes,"⁴⁶ these limits instead dictate responsibility—for to be lucid of one's condition is to question it, allow it to come forth,

⁴⁵ "The Immoralist."

⁴⁶ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 753.

and to embrace it. The space created from this allowance of life is the space where, as Heidegger puts it (quoting a poem by Hölderlin), “poetically, man dwells.”⁴⁷ This is the space Jacques finds himself in *The First Man*, “caught between the two deserts of sunlight and shade”;⁴⁸ it is the only space with which we have to work, and all others imagined in our times of fancy or despair amount merely to an escape—an escape of self, for selfhood is to embrace our condition, and our condition “is Absurd”—in that they negate the principal variable of A. The negation of A implies the negation of all that follows. And certainly that which follows, life teaches, cannot be negated.

Now that The Absurd has been discussed philosophically, and considering the sort of incompleteness it reached by such a method, let’s look at Camus’ aesthetic methods. What threads span between all his modes of writing? Numerous times Camus tells us that he is an artist first, and only second a philosopher: while his thought is clearly philosophical, it is not meant to be taken as rule or guidebook, but is meant to be felt. Therefore, consider the following as an exploration of his artistic merit in order that the conceptual threads may be experienced through his art.

In certain writers, no matter their subject, there are generally distinct and formal characteristics that accompany their thoughts. In Marcel Proust there is the long sentence, with its side thoughts and ideas that go in and out of different moments in time; with Dostoyevsky there are quick moments of dialogue followed by the long, drawn-out monologue and the amplifying up of passionate dedication; Sartre prefers the ambiguity and “realism” of the ellipses in his characters’ consciousness that reflects their confusion towards their condition; in Nietzsche

⁴⁷ Heidegger uses this phrase as the title for an essay, “...Poetically Man Dwells...”, found in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, where he discusses Hölderlin’s poem (211).

⁴⁸ Camus, *The First Man*, 39.

there is the aphoristic uttering of Zarathustra. All these writers provide examples of how a form equates to a thematic idea. What is Camus' method?

In *The Stranger* we find in Meursault, through his dialogue and inner thoughts, a sort of shyness and naiveté towards life marked by a cool and detached penchant for observation. He apologizes and tries to explain himself constantly. He follows strangers through the town because he “didn't have anything to do.”⁴⁹ Take, for example, his cut-off attempt to clarify himself to the caretaker of his deceased mother,

He thumbed through a file and said, “Madame Meursault came to us three years ago. You were her sole support.” I thought he was criticizing me for something and I started to explain. But he cut me off.⁵⁰

And again, in conversation with his neighbor Salamano about his mother, “He called her ‘your poor mother.’ He said he supposed I must be very sad since Maman died, and I didn't say anything.”⁵¹ At the end of this scene, in a rare act of kindness for both Salamano and any character in a Camus novel, Salamano presents his hand for Meursault to shake, but all Meursault feels is “the scales on his skin.”⁵² What we get in these examples and in so many others can be described as a general feeling of alienation; Meursault is detached from the other characters and their cares. His habits and thoughts alienate him from the people around him in that they reflect completely different interests. Meursault is, of course, “the stranger,” but he is not just a stranger to others, but also himself; not only does he feel detached from the outside world, but he does not give any metaphysical meaning to his own life. What this leads to is a rather contemptible character, a sort of anti-hero who has nothing even closely heroic about him.

⁴⁹ *The Stranger*, 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 46.

What Meursault does represent and champion though is the physical qualities of life that are immediately perceptible. In the very same scene quoted above, though he does not recognize the emotional character of Salamano's handshake, he does observe the physical character of the act in detail. As David Sprintzen says, Meursault "...simply refuses to interpret his experience or to give it a significance beyond what is immediately present to the senses."⁵³ Aesthetically then, the short sentences and attention to physical detail convey these ideas. Meursault then embodies what Camus says in the Myth, "...the flesh is my only certainty. I can live only on it. The creature is my native land."⁵⁴

As Camus first completed and published novel, *The Stranger* pushes this theme to the limit, culminating in the famous image of Meursault's murder of an Arab on the beach. It is not until Meursault is left to himself in a jail cell, and in the wake of such life-altering events, that he finally begins to analyze and consider his existence as something more than beaches, evening dusk, and sensuous flings with random girls; in essence, through simple, phenomenological action and the sober contemplation that follows, Meursault is presented with *his* meaning. Likewise, in Camus' own life we see the marked change of World War Two on his writing and thought, which is then reflected in his fictional writing. The transition from *The Stranger* to *The Plague* and *The Fall* is critically marked by the amount of reflection and thought that defines his different characters. *The Fall* is, among other things, itself one giant confession that reaches into metaphysical territory more than once. But what does this transition mean? And how exactly does it line up with Camus' thought?

If *The Stranger* is marked by descriptive and rather basic accounts of existence, with the emptiness and cut-off elements characteristic in Meursault's attempts to displace this very

⁵³ David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 24.

⁵⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87.

void—much like many of Camus' essays of the time—then perhaps, with the dawn of Camus' coming to age through war and an ever-growing world climate, *The Plague* and *The Fall* mark a movement to another, more ethereal plane of existence. His writing, as it increases in the thought and reflection of his characters, shows this transformation. However before this move can take on importance, Camus is intent on reminding us that there has been a gain through Meursault's struggles: lucidity, at least towards the phenomenological realm.

What can be taken then from Camus' early success as a writer is *a method*: The Absurd, as typified in the Absurd Cycle of *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Caligula*, is a first step towards a further goal of understanding meaning, a meaning that includes life and also death, and a meaning based primarily on a lucid acceptance and examination of condition, prior to any normative claims. Thus, this initial body of work

gives me [Camus] an opportunity to raise the only problem to interest me: is there a logic to the point of death? I cannot know unless I pursue, without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence, the reasoning of which I am here suggesting the source. This is what I call an absurd reasoning.⁵⁵

So contrary to many critics' (and popular culture) accounts of Camus' Absurd thinking, the idea is not to end with Absurdity, but merely to use it as a description and as a starting place:

When I analyzed the feeling of the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practicing methodical doubt. I was trying to make a "tabula rasa," on the basis of which it would then be possible to construct something.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 9.

⁵⁶ "Three Interviews," from *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 356.

The idea of creating a “*tabula rasa*”⁵⁷ is an age-old move for any writer who strives for clarity and meaning, and although parts of Camus’ philosophical writing, especially in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, can be generally opaque, his very want to get to a place of lucidity and, yes, even logical analysis, comes out clear when considering his movement from one cycle of writing to another. As hard as it may be for someone to grasp the largely descriptive nature of the first part of Camus’ thought, it follows from the above quoted interview (and other places) that the Absurd *was not an end in and of itself, but merely a starting point*. This leads us to consider what I take to be one of the essential crystals of Camus’ writing, which places him directly in the space of a traditional philosophic method: his view on how we come to know and understand the world around us—his epistemology.

Epistemology, defined as the study or theory of knowledge, is a bedrock concept of philosophy. It is in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the acquiring and understanding of knowledge is most succinctly addressed in Camus’ work, though hints are laid throughout earlier essays, most noticeably in the collections *L’Envers et L’Endroit*⁵⁸ and *Noces*,⁵⁹ both collected in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.⁶⁰ Though Camus never specifically addresses his “epistemology” per se (as, say, a more modern, analytically leaning philosopher would), woven in and out of his fiction and selected essays lies clues that all point towards a nexus of ideas that lead to a thought-out and consciously understood epistemological outlook. Importantly, this understanding of knowledge will point towards limits and a mean—one which is paramount to his idea of The Absurd.

⁵⁷ Latin for “blank slate.”

⁵⁸ “The Wrong Side and the Right Side.”

⁵⁹ “Nuptials.”

⁶⁰ For an expanded account of Camus’ earliest writing, see Paul Viallaneix’s introductory essay in *Youthful Writings: The First Camus*.

Consider the recurrent theme of *simplicity* in “Between Yes and No,” originally from *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. Camus writes, “There is a dangerous virtue in the word simplicity... every time it seems to me that I’ve grasped the deep meaning of the world, it is its simplicity that always overwhelms me.”⁶¹

He illustrates this point with a quick and rather depressing story about a cat he had and its litter; the cat could not feed its offspring, and one by one they died. Finally, the last died and the mother ate half of it while Camus was out of his apartment. As he is cleaning up the mess, “with my hands in the filth and the stench of rotting flesh reeking in my nostrils,”⁶² he is struck by an *image*:⁶³ “the demented glow in the cat’s green eyes as it crouched motionless in the corner.”⁶⁴ One can imagine coming home to an apartment filled with the stench of dying cats, working up the nerve to clean them up, and then being watched by the killer from the corner. This exhausting moment when the assault on the senses has been added onto with an assault on sensibility—when death becomes a real thing with sensory confirmation and when the agent of death in this instance stares you down as you clean up its mess—amounts to a moment of intense, image-laden resonance. The hand comes to your brow and your head pounds. The acknowledgement of the voraciousness of life is one that affects the agent deeply, but the acknowledgement comes merely from a *simple image*: “When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere any more, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image. But why stop there? Simple, everything is simple.”⁶⁵ The image is the murderous cat. That is not only the cause of the event, pure and simple, but also the thing

⁶¹ “Between Yes and No,” from *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 36.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶³ From the Latin “*imaginare*,” meaning “form an image of” or “represent,” and “*imaginary*,” meaning “to picture to oneself,” therefore, “to form an image to oneself,” implying a conscious act of picturing based upon sensory perception. Important to note as well is the highly subjective aspect of this process.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

(“image”) of the event in the mind’s eye: this is the process of imagining. The image crystallizes in the mind as a simple sensory experience; imagine seeing a painting and the sudden and momentary feeling of pleasure or disgust. The feeling is quick and simple. And then the intellect comes in and interprets, possibly distorting the image. Camus asks us here to consider the first feeling, the simplicity of the image as simply lived, the way of life as resonated within the artist. Obvious parallels in this line of thinking are with Marcel Proust’s Madeleine cookie, and the dilution of the initial feeling of the taste of it with each sip of tea.⁶⁶ As Proust attempts to recapture this image through artistic creation—as representing the duration of time to the intellect—so too is Camus trying to capture the exact, simple moment in an image laden with feeling.

But what is so simple about such an image? For Camus, so much of our worries and searching for meaning are summed up in these exact images that appear in our experience, before the intellect has clouded it: “Yes, only to capture the transparency and simplicity of paradise lost—in an image.”⁶⁷ This idea of a specific image capturing a whole feeling is not so revolutionary; one thinks of Jay Gatsby on the pier seeing the green light that signifies his unattainable love, and of numerous other examples in Proust.⁶⁸ However for Camus, this image does not just signify something unattainable (as is the case for Fitzgerald), but more so *the limits* made by that image. The image itself acts as a frame from which the meaning is to be imbibed. In this sense, the recognition of the unattainable—a straightforward meaning and understanding to life outside of the image—dictates the impossibility of the transcendent and then calls for

⁶⁶ From Marcel Proust, *In Remembrance of Things Past, Volume 1: Swann’s Way*, 62-64.

⁶⁷ “Between Yes and No”, from *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 36.

⁶⁸ The Proust-Camus connection is one that, to my knowledge, is never acknowledged by Camus in his writing. There is, however, a book that brings the two thinkers’ ideas of the image together: *The Image in the Modern French Novel* by Stephen Ullmann.

lucidity in the realm of the possible. Lucidity, for Camus, is staying in that specific moment—in the image.

Consider this image conjured in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the following connection to Camus:

And chiefly Thou O Spirit...

Thou from the first

Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread

Dove-like sat brooding on the vast Abyss...⁶⁹

The image of the spirit as a dove sitting over the abyss is a particular image of the plight of sinful man (for Milton); in this moment God sits and contemplates man's fate. This is the metaphysically-loaded image that Camus calls for us to freeze: in this moment, lucidity is what is needed. Will God come down and "impregnate" man? Will the Dove fly down and "illuminate" "what is in me dark"?⁷⁰ But now we have clouded the image. Once we start to question the simplicity of the image, we must be wary—this is the moment before Kierkegaard's leap; this is the moment of danger: "The danger... lies in the subtle instant that precedes the leap. Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge."⁷¹ So for Camus, staying on this crest, standing on the edge—between reason and hell, choosing neither yes nor no—staring over the abyss while not jumping in; all these metaphors equate to a simple image: man's limits.

But yet, what about all the art that longs for transcendence? What about "that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life"?⁷² What about the longing for death,

⁶⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 17-23.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 50.

⁷² Ibid., 6.

for nothingness, that Camus claims is directly associated with these feelings? This disharmony between condition (the Abyss, the setting, the void of being in a universe without order, “a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights”)⁷³ and agent (the Dove, the actor, the waste of being in a body without transcendent soul, “an alien, a stranger... deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land”)⁷⁴ represents the crest of the leap. This is the image of man qua The Absurd. The point here is that this image strikes one in a moment, as a simple and fleeting sensation of primal existence. Camus says it is in that moment we must stay.

What then is Camus’ specific epistemology beyond simplicity and imagination?

We are reminded over and over again of the experiential nature of Absurdity. As Descartes willed himself to nothingness and back through actively thinking and, yes, sensing and observing,⁷⁵ so we are reminded constantly of the observational and experiential nature of the task, amounting to the feeling of The Absurd; “What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life?... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”⁷⁶ Important to Camus is that which can be felt, both by the hands and the soul: “So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art.... The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me much more.”⁷⁷ What this amounts to then is an idea of knowledge that relies heavily on the phenomenological. However, this does not relate the whole picture: “I realized that if through

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ From Meditation Two, “Let us consider those things which are commonly believed to be the most distinctly grasped of all: namely the bodies we touch and see...for instance, this piece of wax... taken quite recently from the honeycomb;...honey flavor... scent of flowers... [etc.]” (*Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, 110).

⁷⁶ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 20.

science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. Were I to trace its entire relief with my finger, I should not know any more.”⁷⁸ Thus, what is left is a paradox: what I can trust for sure, according to Camus, is my senses, for with them I see the “soft lines of these hills,” but my senses can only lead me so far. What I am left with is “armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts,” leaving me “A stranger to myself and to the world.”⁷⁹ But yet, “On this plane, at least, there is no happiness if I cannot know.”⁸⁰ At this moment, when Meursault realizes the truth of the void between man and longing and environment and its reply, he utters the cry of despair “tinged with amazement”: “As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.”⁸¹ Importantly, there is the blind rage and bitterness that follows the negation of desire, but within this ultimate realization comes the other side of a new world and open space—an open space that has been revealed through *experience and from a past that was lived by the agent*.

It would then seem that The Absurd is primarily a phenomenon: one that is alive and tangible in the world as felt by many in the depths of their beings. Lucidity then becomes a sort of metaphysic in response to the phenomenon. As Camus writes, “The body, a true path to culture, teaches us where our limits lie.”⁸² This is, admittedly, inconclusive; however I take this to be in line with Camus’ own goal and artistic trajectory. It is not answers that are necessarily sought, but *ways of being*. With this in mind, let’s apply it to the problem raised at the start of this essay in *Neither Victims Nor Executioners* and see how it fleshes out Camus’ call for pacifism and possibility.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *The Stranger*, 122.

⁸² *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 71.

At the beginning I proposed that The Absurd worldview is one that Camus takes to equate to a pacifistic response to the modern situation. What's more, not only should we respond to violence and calamity in a non-violent way, we should rely on our words and dialogue to transmit our foundational beliefs and hopes for humanity. In a nutshell, these beliefs are in the primal goodness of humanity, in the longing for certainty and truth that exists in all peoples, though it may never coherently present itself. These are beliefs in the celebration of the everyday, the physical and the emotional, and finally and most importantly, the foundational belief in *possibility* for all people to find their meaning and live lives worth living. In a simple and concise sense, killing equates to the cutting off of possibility, and possibility, being a central structure of being human, is what has to be at the front of all our considerations. In order for people to engage in the quest from existence to essence and back again, they must have the possibility to live and live authentically, without fear and unconstrained.

In Camus' final book, *The First Man*, which I have been variously using throughout this essay, we get the beautiful yet tragic finale of his writing and his own attempt to move from his existence to the foundations that make up his essence. Important to note is that this book was never finished: Camus died in a car crash on January 4th, 1960 at the age of 46. In his briefcase he had the unfinished manuscript of *The First Man*. In a sheer stroke of literary irony, the novel that was to represent his "return home"—the consummation of his nostalgia for his youth via uncovering his familial roots—*was to lay unfinished by its creator*. In the now published manuscript of the novel, we come to find that Camus' return was to take place on the two planes we have been moving on throughout this essay: the metaphysical and the phenomenological.

On the phenomenological plane, the novel is a return to the concrete phenomena of existence: the sea, sky, beaches, mountains, and fields of his youth and homeland. He traverses his parents move there, his birth, and his childhood. The novel is awash in scenes of the physicality of childhood, struggles with material poverty, and quiet nights spent in hope for a future filled with meaning. On the metaphysical plane, Camus is returning to his essential origins to understand the creation and the possibility of his self. He wants to figure out why he is the way he is, what limits he has essentially due to his character, and what events and peoples shaped the man he has become. This sort of uncovering of the past, though addressed somewhat indirectly in other places, is the main goal of this novel. What's more, his move to understand his youth is marked by a clarity of mind that is not present in his early writings that dealt with such subjects. From the 1930's, when he first really began to write, to the 50's, his literary quest through *The Absurd* and other avenues has brought about a clarity of purpose. The quest of understanding, of uncovering essences and existence tied to the self, has brought about lucidity. Thus, the metaphysic of lucidity has become *a way of being*. Recall earlier statements about *The Absurd* being a method.⁸³ By the time he is writing *The First Man*, he has found his method, and is applying it to answer the fundamental questions of his being.

The tragedy then lies in that this move to understand possibility fully via his origins and youth was ended prematurely due to his death. He had found a way of being and was embarking on the quest to uncover how it related to his essential core, but in this quest, existence was cut off. In other words, Camus never fulfilled his quest to uncover his own possibility for life: when he found his method, it was too late. After years of struggling with the method to understand his own possibility, and finally coming to the place where he felt it was time to understand, he died.

⁸³ "When I analyzed the feeling of the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practicing methodical doubt" ("Three Interviews", from *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 356). Likewise, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he writes, "It is clear that in this way I am defining a method" (11).

I imagine Camus was happy as he drove down open roads with his publisher, Michel Gallimard. I imagine he was free. Having come to a lucid understanding of his method, and hopeful of its aid in helping him on his quest, the possibility of the future must have been exhilarating. The joy of existence, encapsulated in having named a core feature of its phenomenon (“The Absurd”), opened up an endless and entirely human possibility. In effect, the anxiety, fear, alienation, isolation, and melancholy of this phenomena is but the gateway to the open space that it affords. The quest to understand is only the beginning—one must then go forth and live. As Camus puts it, “The preceding [study of The Absurd] merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live.”⁸⁴

So if we consider The Absurd as a blueprint for possibility and the middle space it opens between limits and extremes for existence, then the normative lesson is that we ought to give all people an opportunity to face their condition—and this starts from the basic premise of allowing them a life to live out this quest. If we deny being executioners and instead take up the call of words over munitions, then not only will all people have the possibility to flourish, but through dialogue, communication, and creation, all people will move towards a space of becoming, a space of “humanism”—for the criterion that justifies this possibility is the criterion of being human and all the aspects that entails. In this sober and lucid reflection, the extremist attitudes of religious dogma and the de-humanizing rationale of utilitarianism are discarded for a more neutral, yet wholly passionate, space of the simple and humane. We must face our condition and accept the fact that the universe does (or may) not have a transcendent meaning for us, while at the same time we must resist this condition from within, for we desire meaning and transcendence nonetheless. Importantly, our resistance must be in line with our essence *and* existence—we cannot negate our limits, nor can we choose quietism and intellectual stagnation.

⁸⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 65.

It is in this sense that we can be resolute about our actions, for they come from a place of commitment to the facts of reality that we can be sure about—few and inconclusive as they are. The line then between objective and subjective meaning and political and social action, contrary to traditional distinctions, becomes blurred.

I believe that such a worldview, while at times grimly sobering, can lead humans in the modern day to a place of peace. It is, after all, a worldview of moderation and lucidity, one based on reason yet not entirely beholden to it. In the wake of a continually rising feeling of anxiety and fear, we can learn from Camus' calls for moderation, but only if we can agree on some foundational ideas of existence that justify such views. If we continue to bicker and kill each other over extremist ideologies—whether religious, political, or economic—we will only continue our downward trajectory towards annihilation, but if we take up and champion an idea of moderation, reason, and lucidity, as qualified in a general love for what makes us all similar, and if we refuse to give in to our fear and anxiety, then and only then will we be able to live in peace and have the time and space to explore our possibility, both as individuals and as a community. That is what Camus wanted. And maybe then, after we have accepted our condition and possibility, we will be granted access to the space beyond The Absurd. Perhaps then we will find the clearing and the space which Camus was trying to find in his final and unfinished work. Maybe then we can feel what Camus claims Don Juan feels when he has accepted his existence fully and settled on lucidity; "...It lights up this desert...."⁸⁵

In conclusion I want to hammer in this idea of directing ourselves to the future and the opening up of a vision of possibility. All around me I see an increasingly alarming growth of different forms of nihilism. Camus saw this in his time as well. Whether these forms of nihilism be hedonistic, materialistic, or just plain empty of justification, they all seem to share a common

⁸⁵ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 89.

core of not caring about existence beyond the self, especially the existence of future peoples. They all seem to eschew a common ground or core of what it is to be human in favor of a justification for personal gain, racial superiority, or just plain will to exist without an understanding of what it means to exist well. It has been my goal in this essay, and a goal I take Camus to be working towards as well, to at least move towards a justification for caring about existence and meaning from a largely secular-humanist level, one that is based on an essential core of being human. The idea being that, due to the vast array of religious belief and experience (and the sometimes blinding passion such belief brings out in people) religion should not be the over-arching and foundational principle that gives life meaning; instead, it should be life and existence itself: the waves and color of the sea, the emotional reactions we have to our trials and tribulations, and, most importantly, *the possibility* we have as humans to live in harmony together. Important to note is that religion is not negated in full, but is more so relegated to another facet of existence; one that does not have the full transcendental power it many times claims.

So if we take this as a basic foundation for a secular morality—as a “secular humanism,” if one prefers—then our first step is to react to violence and terror with disdain, and continue to hope in the possibility for rational, lucid, and humane dialogue. And we have reason to do this that is not religious or ideological in nature. This, I believe, is Camus’ legacy and gift to us, one which I hope we can understand and apply in the future.

As inconclusive on the large questions of life as this may seem, perhaps we can come to the conclusion that these large questions should remain objectively inconclusive, while opening up the possibility for individuals to come to them themselves through dialogue, art, and the very act of being, and in peace and harmony. As the ancient Greek lyric poet Pindar put it in *Pythian*

iii, “Oh my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible.”⁸⁶ We must then refuse to consent to any systems or ideologies that stifle the individual’s ability to pursue their truth and meaning through whatever avenues of the mind they wish, while accepting the Truth, proper of our existential condition, one which, though limited by our very phenomenological existence (i.e. our epistemic limits), is perhaps indeed unlimited in its metaphysical possibility. By scraping away the residue of the limits of dogmas and ideologies, and assessing fully our basic existential condition, we might in fact open up a new space—“a clearing” as Heidegger calls it—from which we can spring forth and figure out our essential beings. This I take to be the paradox of The Absurd, a paradox that, when considered and illuminated, allows for humans to flourish and pursue lives worth living. It is then “up to man to forge a unity for himself... within the world. Thus are restored a morality and an austerity that remain to be defined.”⁸⁷ We have more work to do, but perhaps we can agree on a criterion with which to move confidently forward. As Camus says, “it is a matter of persisting.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Camus quotes this line in *Notebooks 1935-1942*, 168; he also uses it as an epigraph at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

⁸⁷ *Notebooks 1942-1951*, 41.

⁸⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 52.

Part 2: The Testament of M.

“To save this miserable man—this modern day Job—from perishing of his wounds on his own dunghill, we must first lift the burden of fear and anxiety so he can rediscover the freedom of thought he’ll need to resolve any of the problems facing the modern conscience.” – Albert Camus⁸⁹

M. had lived in the same city since childhood. At a young age he came to believe in a few hard and fast truths that dictated the general flow of much of his life. These truths he came into contact with through numerous experiences he had, through the education he received that was good, but otherwise unexceptional, through his parents, who were, all things considered, there for him and loving towards him, and through his independent reading between day-to-day commitments. By his teenage years he had read a considerable portion of the classics of his culture, especially the cornerstones of philosophy, had at least mostly-formed notions of prevalent theories of right and wrong, and, on the eve of his eighteenth birthday, wrote in his sketchbook of “the certainties” he had about his life. In effect, M. decided that, to the best of his ability, he would love others as he wanted to be loved, would be sympathetic towards his friends, family, and to the other people in his field of existence as much as possible (though, of course, never too much so as to seem weak), and would pursue a life-trajectory that would ensure him modest material success while also keeping time and thought open for his more spiritual (or “humane,” if you prefer) side to flourish. By his twenty-sixth year, M. had a few thousand dollars in the bank and a beautiful bride who, the year prior, he had married at a local church in

⁸⁹ “*La Crise de l’homme*” (“The Human Crisis”). Camus gave this speech on March 28th, 1946, at Columbia University in New York to a packed audience of students, faculty, and laymen. On the same day of 2016, actor Viggo Mortensen gave the same speech in Camus’ honor.

the traditional fashion that all his relations had been, that is, in front of a priest and a congregation of friends and family. Above the mantel in his new home in the country was a picture of him and his wife walking down the steps of the church with smiles all around from the people who he cared for. In many respects, M. lived a generally full and rich life.

As far as M.'s thought-life was concerned, he held fast to these few certainties but remained open to many ideas—even in some cases (but not when his few certainties were up for debate of course) to the extent of indecision. Though this indecision could be a sign of weakness, he thought of it more of a sign of deep thought and humility (both virtues he held in high esteem), for whenever an issue came up that he was not sure about, he thought it best to suspend his judgment and instead only ask questions. For this, he became known in his small circle of friends as “smart,” “kind,” “patient,” and above all, “wise.” In fact, on his wedding registry a close friend wrote, “M. the Pious! Best of luck to you and your bride!” Other friends noticed this comment, and soon the moniker stuck. M. was, after this joyous occasion, cemented as the model of patience and wisdom in his social group. Even his distant (but generally loving) father remarked one day over dinner, “Well M., you must have a disposition for charity after all—for all your friends to be so gracious towards you!”; to which M. replied, in his ever-increasingly stoic way (since his recent ascension to piety), “I only do what I know to be right, when I know it to be.” Though his older sister, who had seen the contrary a few times when M. was younger, held her tongue at this comment, many of those closest to M. would agree with the father's judgment; by most accounts, M. was, as they say, “a good man,” and entirely blameless.

However one day, a slight fog settled in the valley of the town he lived in and refused to let up as the sun broke through in scattered rays throughout the grey day. This day seemed to him, though he knew not why then, to be a day of certain importance; it carried with it a gravity,

an impetus, and the possibility of a new certainty for him—as if the fog descended not from a natural cycle of weather patterns, but from a realm of supernatural or metaphysical beings. He shrugged to himself and took another sip of coffee as he thought of the subjects he studied in college of old, grand battles fought over the allegiance of men in the Greek era by Gods who seemed not to care for man’s struggles. Like his progression from the era of Dionysus and Apollo to the era of Descartes and Mill in his academic career, so too did his mind focus on a more reasonable explanation for the weather pattern; he replaced his romantic visions of gods with a reasoned explanation: “fog forms when the difference between the dew point and air temperature is a certain degree.” He probed his mind for the specific number but could not bring it to recollection. “All well,” he thought as he picked up the paper, “surely the temperature will fluctuate enough later in the day for the fog to lift.” But as the day progressed, whether by the rage of gods for his actions or merely due to the actual lack of fluctuation in the atmospheric temperature, the fog stayed. With his nightly cup of tea, he noted the strange phenomenon in his journal alongside a few random thoughts on *King Lear*, which he was reading for the third time in preparation for the class he taught at the local community college, and went to bed with the clear and distinct belief that tomorrow the sun would rise and the fog would be lifted. Why question such a certainty now?

Upon waking the next day, in drawing the curtains from the front window in their bedroom, his wife commented, “Why, what a beautiful day! The fog has finally lifted! I’ve never known a fog to stay so strongly and clearly for more than a morning.” However when M. walked onto his porch after pouring a cup of coffee, he noticed that, in fact, the fog had not lifted; across the street he could not see the cornfields, nor the windbreaks that separated them, but instead could only make out a film, washed in a sepia tone, that hung across his vision. At first he

chalked this up to an acute feeling of drowsiness, but as he shifted his gaze and rubbed his eyes, the mist over his vision would not dissipate. Puzzled, he picked up the paper—as he did every morning—and felt a slight pain shoot through his lower back. Unlike the series of routine actions he had gone through this morning, like many of the rest, this pain he had never experienced before. Following this ache, a dull realization began to creep over him, a realization that, once again, he had never experienced in his twenty-six years. The ache in his back shot straight up his spine and tugged on a nerve close to his otherwise healthy brainstem. He began to feel (but not necessarily to understand) that the actions he had performed over the last year had created a routine, one which was colored, it seemed, by a series of other routines that he had created, which in turn had sprung forth from experiences he had for a large portion of his life—the same experiences that had created his beloved certainties. Something about these routines, it now seemed to M., was pernicious; something was strange and uncanny about them when he thought of them all strung together. It was as if the ache in his back actually stretched out of his body, broke into the dimension of time, and put cracks in the series of routines he had built his current life upon. But in the cracks something else grew.

This feeling, as it began to crystallize in his mind, knocked the breath out of M., and he stumbled over to the creaky old Adirondack chair he spent many evenings in. Sinking down onto its cracked boards, he tried to focus his thoughts: “Why am I feeling this way? Did I do something to someone? Is this that karma my wife was talking about?” But he could not focus. The feeling that swept over him was too much. It was if the fog that he perceived to be in the world around him the day before had, by means of a deceiving demon or evil wizard, been inserted into the folds of his brain and was slowly eroding his power of clear and distinct reasoning. He attempted to catch back up to reality by reciting what he knew to be indubitable:

the basic axioms of geometry: “Things that are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another...” He paused to let the truth he knew to be true take effect.

But it meant nothing. It was merely there, suspended in time and space, but lacking in meaningful efficacy.

He then recited another truth he knew to be indubitable, namely, the two main warring parties of World War Two and the outcome of that war (which, although he felt learned and certain of many aspects of the great conflict, had been generally long forgotten by the public of M.’s community and was merely an afterthought for educators who were now more focused on blindly running towards the future without considering what is to be learned and uncovered from the past), “The Allies defeated the Axis powers, and the war officially ended on... the 2nd of September, 1945.” Proud of himself for remembering the exact date, M. breathed a sigh of relief. But instead of a trail of thoughts that would connect this recitation to a deeper or more expository meaning, say, to the importance of literary works that responded to the atrocious bombing of London during the conflict—as would have been his trail of thought on any other day—this recollection stopped, as if halted by an unmovable edifice in his mind... and the thought began to slowly drift away from him, as if his recollection of its truth had lost its anchor in his brain. In its place he felt a small pang in his temple, as the slight tapping of a hammer of an all-powerful artist chiseling away at stone, and the harder he tried to catch what was being engulfed by the diligence of the fog, the harder the artist pounded on the chisel... so he finally just let the thought slip fully away and be engulfed in the mist. Then, in place of the indubitable truths he held so firmly, a new creation seemed to take shape: a boulder that he previously knew nothing about, nor that he knew even existed, was appearing in his mind. Upon inspecting this artifice in his mind a bit more, he found this boulder to be blocking many avenues of his brain,

and most shockingly, the avenue that led to his certainties for the happy life he led. “How strange!” he said out loud to himself, “To be—”

A figure stood in front of him. The shock of the clear—yet strangely obfuscated—outline, silhouetted in fog, jostled his reverie... it was the mailman, who had a package in the shape of a book for him and a slip of paper to sign. As his vision coalesced on the being, he stood up and mechanically began to greet the courier, “How... how...” but the words would not come forth; “How are...” he tried again, “How... are ...you?” The mailman, experiencing a bit of confusion himself, responded in a similarly mechanical way and held the slip out to M., “sign here, please.” M. took up the pen that was presented to him, and, with much effort, scribbled a single letter—**M**—close to the line that the mailman pointed to. He tried to give thanks for the courier’s services, but could not utter the blessing. He stammered a bit and tried to will his feet to move backwards from the figure in front of him. A moment of inaction swelled up between the two, followed by the mailman setting the package between M.’s hands and giving a shockingly sinister smile. “But...” M. began, the rough corners of the parcel scratching his naked palms... but nothing else came forth. He wanted to cry out, but he had no voice. The other, after a moment spent in waiting, left the porch, and was swallowed in the mist just a few feet in front of the landing. M. turned around with much effort and forced himself to walk back through the threshold of his house, the package in his hand.

As he slowly and carefully stepped inside, to his shock, he felt a strong draft of wind peel around his bare ankles, swoosh up his back, and swirl around his head. This draft of air—or spirit, or light, or some other such supernatural phenomenon—swept through the main floor, knocking over lamps and pictures, and finally exited through an open window at the far end of his house with a loud bang! that shook the foundation. At this point M. began to feel and see

clearly, despite the fog that covered his brain, that some outside force was indeed overturning the verdict he and many others had of himself (namely, that he was beyond reproach and entirely blameless).

Staggering towards a fallen picture of his wife, he tripped over his own feet and fell to the ground, the book-shaped package vaulting from his grasp into a corner where it was engulfed in darkness. His palms were cut by broken glass and his right elbow hit a side table, causing a series of sharp pains to resound through his body. Though his mind registered the sensation immediately, his intellect was moments behind in the realization that he was physically harmed. He lay on the floor in shards of glass. His mind was racing, but the fog did not allow it to follow any thought to fruition. He could only perceive, in the depths of his mind, a wasteland.

Stretched out before a man on horseback lay an impenetrably vast landscape of scattered debris and other such remnants of various industrial projects. Nestled in dunes of sand and earth were white trunks of decayed trees, masses of scraggly brush, and the occasional sprout of tall grass. Twisted pipes and chimneys variously sprouted out of the bushes and vines. Above the rider, a dreary but bright moon provided the only light, and far off in the distance a slow, trembling bass sound thumped to an untimed and illogical rhythm. Gripping his steed tightly, the rider pushed forward in an almost blind rage. I must understand, he thought, I must know. I must—

He heard a groan from upstairs and shook with a startle. “My wife!” he thought, “she...where is she?” And so, with a force of will utterly foreign to his being up until this point in

his life, he lifted himself up and began to move towards the stairwell just around the corner from his current position. As he was turning towards the stairs, the doorbell rang. He stood in stupor. He couldn't make out what to do. And just as quickly as the will to action came upon him, so it left. He stood paralyzed. There was no clear path to take and no clear and distinct action to perform; he had no method of action, no clear reasoning to move him. The doorbell rang again, but this time it was followed by a series of loud knock knock knocks. Turning mechanically on his heel, M. shifted towards the door. Again he heard sounds from above him, but this time he could make out a sharp cry as well, and then a faint utterance, "Meur—"; but as he was straining to hear what his wife was saying, a loud banging on the door resounded through the floorboards under him, followed by three momentous raps. The door creaked and fell forward into the room, followed by a swoosh of dust and dirt. M., at this point in complete and utter disarray and lacking in more than mechanical thought, focused all his attention in front of him to face whatever being was responsible for the crashing of his door. But instead of a being before him, a great flood of light scorched his face. He fell to one knee, clasping his hands across his forehead. The heat and light was intense... and for the first time in his life, he felt a rage well up inside of him—a murderous rage for the events of the morning that seemed to have thrown his whole life into utter chaos. The intensity of this sensation, combined with the driving light, pierced a chord deep inside of him and he collapsed on the floor.

For M.'s ninth birthday he asked his parents to organize and provide the materials for a neighborhood-wide squirt gun fight. Though his father considered this request childish, and suggested that they go as a family to the local theatre to see a performance of *The Tempest* instead, his parents eventually crafted a letter that explained M.'s wishes, copied enough for all

the houses in the complex they knew to have children, and sent the request out a couple of days before the event was to take place. M.'s peers, upon arriving home from school that Friday, began plotting and scheming for ways to turn the playful occasion into a mass war of worlds. At class all day alliances had been drawn, maps of the neighborhood (and outlying woods) created, and strategic "choke points" between houses and gardens considered for ambushes. By the end of the day, all the children fell asleep to visions of military glory.

Saturday morning came, and instead of watching cartoons (which, within a few years of M.'s birth, had gone from four channels to one anyway), M. and his friends, though still physically separated by their houses (although every house in his complex was but a variant of one model), all indulged in a special presentation of the key events of World War Two that was showing in honor of the following Monday, which was Memorial Day. In varying degrees of ecstasy the children sat enraptured by trench warfare, battles in snow and ice, massive airplanes dropping tons of explosives on strategic sites, and stern-looking men yelling commands to audiences of thousands. Without connecting the visceral use of munitions to the death of millions of people (a connection M. would make, to his initial horror, in College, and would feign horror at in his later life—though the event had lost its intensity and had become just another vague "fact of history"), M. and his friends allowed the past reality that played out in front of them to mould with their future prospect of heroism and bloody glory on the battlefield of cul-de-sacs, neatly trimmed bushes, and faux stone statues of angels and forgotten Roman deities. With their peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches in hand, they rallied their platoons of raisins and apple slices to meet on the field of battle—a brightly colored, semi-translucent plastic plate that changed colors in the wash. The stage was set. Glory awaited them.

But alas, as one recent poet has rekindled the timeless truth, “nature had another plan”; a typical summer storm furiously ripped through the open fields surrounding the suburb that M. and his compatriots had envisioned to be their own personal Ragnarok on Sunday morning—the awaited day of reckoning—and kept all but the most adventurous traveler in-doors. While Zeus clapped his strong hands and laughed in euphoric ecstasy at the fragile mortals’ dwellings as they trembled down to their very core, M. sat in a depressed state on his couch waiting for the moment the gods’ revel was to cease. But to his dismay, the storm swirled around the suburban landscape until the sun set, and all his plans of heroism and military glory faded into the calm darkness of a day spent already in the gloom of torrential rain. Cut off from the outside world, M. had no idea that many of the other children in the complex, mindless of his depressed state, had braved the storm for brief moments to come together in one child’s house for a day of movies and popcorn. No one thought to invite M. (who, remember, was celebrating his ninth year of existence).

It was not until Tuesday in class that he found out about the treasonous plot to exile him from the companionship he so desired. What did M. do to deserve such treatment from his peers? Did he say (or maybe imply) something in class the previous week? Maybe he smelled funny or had dandruff? Recalling the occasion later in life, he could not understand what he did to deserve such castigation. Nonetheless, this event, in one form or another, would stick with him through elementary and middle school and coalesce in a series of continual out-casted states in high school. This event of his childhood, to his later dismay, marked a turning in his life-trajectory, one which would not become apparent until much later in his life. The feeling of alienation, of the disjunction of his desires and the actions of others, which first became apparent in this scene

from the suburbs, was to follow him his whole life—just below the surface of his consciousness, waiting to be realized and released.

When M. awoke the pain in his chest had multiplied and stretched across his skin. Coming slowly to, he brought his arm up to his face, and, to his horror, he saw a piece of flesh that barely resembled a hand. Covering its outer edge were sore boils, the likeness of which he had not seen but in century old depictions of Biblical stories. So grotesque was the scene in front of him that M., in a moment of confusion, horror, and instinct, grabbed a shard of glass from the floor next to him. Barely feeling the glass cut into the hand that held it, he scraped the other with an animal ferocity. Pus and blood oozed down his bruised and battered arm and dripped onto his legs. Though pain shot through his whole being, M. could only feel a sharp tapping inside his head. It was as if the nerves that transmuted from his extremities to his sense organs had been scorched into oblivion by the blasting light from before. Or maybe it was the case that the boulder that had been growing in his mind was now fully in place, waiting for a mover.

“What is happening to me?” he thought, as fear increasingly gained mastery over his mind, “What does this mean? It must mean something. I must have done something.” He racked his brain, but in every vase of memory could only find blobs of colors and shapes without meaning, definition, or anchor in certainty. This collection of vases, once so full of impressions that called forth, in the right circumstances, wells of knowledge, feelings, and moments of importance, now only represented a lost time of meaning and truth: a Paradise Lost. But all that was gone now. The vast structure of recollection he had built up for years, upon being noticed as

vacuous, fled into the void in the back of his skull. There, the vases cracked and the impressions slipped out and away, into the mist that surrounded his brain.

The solitary rider rapidly moved across the barren, desert-like wasteland. His steed, barely able to keep pace and puffing with exertion, let out a snort. The mist from its breath jarred the otherwise empty air of the night. The rider, conscious of the intense speed he pushed his horse to follow, leaned close to the beast and muttered a few words of encouragement: "We're almost there. We'll make it." But the horse, with no faculty of understanding and at the end of its life, came to an abrupt halt, bent down on its knees, and, as the rider jumped off, laid down on its side. With one final snort, it drew its last breath, and died.

The man, upon realizing his steed's demise, reached into his pocket and drew out a pack of tobacco and papers. Sitting on a nearby mound of compacted ash and earth, he rolled a cigarette. Gazing over the landscape from his ash-heap, he let out a sigh.

In between the vegetation he could make out ruins of buildings and roads, dotted with leveled, wooden posts and bits of wires. In one dune he saw a heap of rusty, twisted metal that resembled a car. In another dune farther off a structure of interlocking metal pipes rose up unto the horizon. Though the wasteland in front of him was not entirely unfamiliar, there was something uncanny about it that struck him. Is there something in this patch of land that is different, or is it just the abnormal color of the moon tonight?, he thought to himself. Grasping his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, he flicked the tip until the burning tobacco shot a couple of feet to the ground beside him. Putting the remaining delicacy in his pocket, he walked over to his dead companion.

The horse's eyes, dark orbs in a sea of matted fur, had grayed over slightly and its jaw hung slightly open. The man grabbed a rucksack from the beast's exposed flank and set it down by his side. Kneeling down next to the beast, he gave its mass a heave. And again he pushed. Finally, he was able to uncover the edge of his other bag, and, with a tug, he was able to pull it out from under the dead flesh. Roping the two sacks together, he flung them over his back and started walking towards the thumping sound in the distance. Something drew him; something true and real called for him.

As M. sat in confusion upon the ruinous house of his mind, a series of new feelings welled up in his being. These new ideas came to him in a rapid succession, one after the other, in keeping time with the pang in his temple. Unlike his beloved certainties, and unlike the dusty facts of history that he had known from before, these new sensations of knowledge seemed to, while having a shape, not inhabit any definite space in his being. They were misty and amorphous. Or perhaps, instead of these ideas being housed in an absence, they came out of the void-space prior to the new absence of space in his mind. Perhaps the crushing pain of the day had not only squeezed out of M. every ounce of objective certainty he had in regards to himself and the world around him, but had created a space from which new thoughts could spring forth and reside—thoughts not burdened by an external Truth, but that had been impressed upon his being through a new series of experiences—experiences which had been sprung upon him by the external force they themselves had negated. And perhaps these experiences cleared the way for that which resides behind vague arguments of objective and subjective truth to come to be inside of him; in fact maybe, beyond the scope of human reason, another world exists, a world that is not “the real,” but merely is the world which is—the world outside of our perception; the world

that is dictated by it on a phenomenological plane, one that is resistant to abstraction, one that is primal and essential.

But alas, this moment of transparency and possibility, which seemed to have been alluded to by his impression of the day's gravity earlier, quickly receded once again, and like the last smell of fall is taken up in the first cold drizzle of winter, went into hibernation in some dark corner of his mind. Though the exact thoughts were gone, the impression stuck. Lifting his head to the floorboards above him, he cried out in anguish.

Turning his gaze towards the front of his house, M. heard a noise outside which seemed to emanate from the porch; slow and prodding, the noise swirled around his mind. He heard the boards of the deck sway with weight. Summoning his strength, he moved once again to the front door. A pale, red light shown under the entrance and engulfed his feet. He paused. The image appeared again in his mind.

The steed-less wanderer walked slowly through the bombed out and squalid terrain in front of him. He couldn't bring himself to look towards the horizon, but merely kept his gaze to the ground beneath his feet. Where was he going? What was the sound in the distance? The wind began to pick up and a slight drizzle began. The branches of the occasional tree creaked and swayed in the wind. The fields of solitary grasses bent under the weather. His eyes watered and his feet hurt, but he carried on. Persistence, he thought, I must persist. Seconds passed and turned into minutes; minutes became hours and he felt the passage of time weigh heavily on his legs and face.

Eventually, he did look up and found a vast edifice in front of him. He stopped dead in his tracks. Twisted concrete and steel formed a giant, cylindrical boulder of a building. What is this? he thought, this shouldn't be here. Looking to his left and right, the concrete jungle spread out as far as he could see, swirling in eddies of neutral colors and harsh, jagged shapes. The edifice, though cylindrical in nature, defied a clear and distinctly solid form, but rather merely had its shape from the outline of the meek light behind it. It was silhouetted by the pale illumination of the moon; it was amorphous and looked as if it had been another shape at one point before it was squeezed through a cylindrical tube.

The man reached out his tired arm and touched the building. Cool to the touch, and with a texture of sandstone—its solidity, he thought, must go forever. Walking to his right, he followed the curve of the outer shell for an indiscernible amount of time. Eventually, after much effort, he came upon the outline of a door in the wall. But to where? To inside? Or maybe to another side? Following the outline of the door with his hands, he grasped a knob. Turning it, a gasp of air escaped his lungs.

The door slowly creaked open and the man stepped forward into the dark space in front of him. Silence. Stuffy air. The moisture in the space weighed on his lungs and he coughed. He groped in his pocket for his matchbook, and taking it out, transferred it from one hand to another. Unsure of his place in the cavernous edifice he struggled to find the bodily equilibrium he needed to strike the match. Centering himself with immense effort and focusing on his external movements, he engaged the matchbook. Once his eyes adjusted to the flame, he beheld in front of him a giant space filled with mountains of cylindrical objects painted in various colors and of various sizes. He recalled these objects from long ago—vases. Painted on them were images that seemed uncannily familiar to him: houses of similar make and model, fields of

wheat, churches and steeples, faces and bodies of people, shores of islands and cliffs of rock and earth. He also saw, sticking out of these vases, three statues that resembled old wise men—each with a single word etched in red across their respective foreheads: **Guilt, Ignorance, and Fear.**

The man walked tenuously forward, slowly surveying the seemingly infinite storehouse in front of him. His heart began to race, for he knew he had found what he was looking for: the great boulder of his mind.

One of the vases gave off a reddish glow unlike the rest. It was situated in the center of the room on a structure made of stone blocks, one piled on the other, in the shape of an altar. The three statues looked down menacingly at this vase. Approaching the altar, the pulse of his heart raced and became unbearable. He faltered and fell to his knees. I can't make it, he thought, I can't get there. His will was fading. The statues seemed to turn their eyes towards him and gazed deeply through bulging eyes into his soul. He couldn't look away and he couldn't move. He couldn't overcome the immense feeling of paralysis he felt... and indeed he always felt. Every attempt he made to act, he realized, no matter the time, situation, place, or event, was in vain. Always there had been the paralysis of the self and the inexhaustible, infinite, and unreachable external world. The statues began to animate: they laughed at him in tremendous waves of sound.

And then, descending from above, a formless creature came drifting towards him. Paralyzed still, he could not move to dodge this incoming projectile. Flames and screeching sounds whirled off the creature's being; books and gold coins rained down around the room; wailings of sexual pleasure emanated throughout the chamber; an immense heat flushed the man's face and he kneeled, completely captivated by the immense display of power, seduction,

and force before him. All his thoughts swirled around his brain at breakneck speed; all his feelings impressed on his mind. He was tempted to reach out and grab the hurling monstrosity before him; if only to grasp it and understand, he thought, as he slowly raised his arm, if only to feel the power and to know—if only to elevate myself into strength and force like this god of this hellish space. I desire it, I want it!

And then, as he willed his hand into his field of vision, his eyes caught the lines on his palm, the hairs around his wrist, and the scratches and bruises on his skin. Time stood still. The form of the human limb in front of him glowed effervescently. His knuckles, bloody and cracked, his protruding wrist bone, delicate but strong, his chipped nails—all glowed with vitality. A feeling of hope and familiarity welled up inside him. My body, he thought, my body: the curves of this hand, the pulsing of the blood underneath the skin, the movement of its form from space to space and within a moment to another... its beauty and grace. Raising his other arm, he brought his hands together. Yes... Yes this feels right. This I know and this I see clearly.

Turning his eyes away from the hellish beast still suspended in midair, he looked at the altar before him. His gaze fell on the vase; a crack in its outer shell moved down its spine: it split completely in two. Out of it poured light, sound, and the man's past life in a series of starkly contrasting and lucidly bright, film-like images. Falling onto the altar, he closed his eyes as the edifice around him collapsed.

Pushing the door open, M. walked out into the night. Silence reigned supreme. It was so quiet around him that his thoughts and his pulse seemed to take on a shape in the horizon, creating a steady sound. A red glow emanated from the earth around him, and its warmth soothed

his mind; he did not feel pain anymore, but instead his body felt light and calm. Looking around, he noticed an ominous figure standing a few feet away. The mailman—The Adversary. Walking towards him, The Adversary looked M. in the face, and after clearing his throat with a guttural sound, began M.'s interrogation:

“Do you find existence painful?”

“Yes,” M. replied.

“Why?”

“Many sensations feel bad and cause harm. Just today I went through an ordeal of intense pain. Though I know much of my life has largely not been characterized by such pain, these recent inflictions have caused me to reflect on the few others... I have now probed further into my life and have found that, even in the moments when I am not readily perceiving them, these harrowing events, if not in quantity then in quality, have the most impact on me... I now feel life, in all its sensation.”

“Are these painful moments mostly of the sensory kind?”

“No. The sensory pain is only a gateway to the pains of the mind. The phenomenological pains of existence are merely a threshold to the self's pains beneath the physical shell.”

“And what are these pains of the mind and self?”

“Though they manifest themselves in different ways and have different connotations and content, they can all be put under the umbrella of ‘anxiety’—that is, they all cause, upon reflection, a feeling of ‘uncanniness’ about being.”

“And what is the content of this uncanniness?”

“Anxiety. Soul-sickness. Confusion. Fear and Trembling.”

“Is this always on your mind?”

“Not always... But now that I see it and can name it, I can say that most of the time, in one way or another, it was always there, under the surface of things, ready to boil over.”

“And what will you do to keep going? How will you persist forward despite this condition?”

“I will hold on to some vestige of hope.”

The Adversary scoffed, “And what is this ‘hope’ you speak of?”

M. remained silent for a moment. Looking out into the field across from his house, he replied, “It is a belief that, despite the evidence, life has a larger meaning and purpose than suffering. It is a rejection of the abyss... It is a belief in possibility.”

Smiling its wicked smile, The Adversary continued, “And why do you have this ‘hope’ and this belief?”

“I have found upon uncovering my being through the suffering of the past day that I have it as an essential structure of who I am. It is in me. *It is me.*”

“How do you know this to be true?”

“It is. I am. I have hope, despite the evidence, and therefore I exist.”

M. shifted his weight and The Adversary snorted.

“So now what will you do?” the interrogator asked, his eyes shifting back and forth restlessly.

“I will summon this hope and I will rebel against my contradictory condition by asserting not only my hope, but my foundational belief in my hope; I will assert *myself*,” M. replied, pausing to reword, “I will assert my *essence*. Thus, although I cannot transcend this pain by negating it, I can transcend it by dragging it along as I push forward.”

“And how will you manage such a feat?”

“By creating. By connecting to my essential being as The First Man. By living authentically in the space I am in. By being.”

“What will you create?” The Adversary replied, lifting an eyebrow, his eyes slowly growing larger.

“I will create myself through my art and ideas; by validating them from my essential feeling and criterion of the good and the true—the human. I will create myself. And my connection to others,” M. replied, gaining speed and staring the beast right in its face.

Taken aback, The Adversary continued nonetheless, “And what is the essential, foundational object of being human?”

“It is to care about everything that I have said previous; it is to care and move forward and project what I know to be the truth which is true for me from within this care, while also holding the Truth, proper of my condition.”

“And what is this ‘Truth, proper’ you speak of?”

“It is the fundamental goodness of every individual and their own, subjective tie to a painful and contradictory existence. This is the paradox of being, one that calls for perseverance, solidarity, and yes, a hope in the future possibility of being. This is simplicity and lucidity.”

The Adversary shuddered. It shuffled its hooves.

“And what if you are wrong?” it said, attempting to grin once more.

“Then I will surely pay for my failure. This is the risk I take. I rebel, therefore I am,” M. replied.

“And what if I propose to you ‘the *real* Truth, proper’?” The tempter retorted, rubbing its paws together.

“I will listen,” M. responded, “but I will not consent to it if it contradicts what I know to be the truth, improper.”

“Why?”

“Because it is all I can know truly. It is all I know. It is my limit—that which I cannot transcend.”

The Adversary, shaking with trepidation, considered for a moment, “But that’s why you must have faith... surely you know this?” he whispered. “One must have faith... to transcend. One must accept and obey... One must... carry the light of the eternal. One must... one must believe! One must—”

“No. I do not know that which has no perceivable qualities and which I cannot understand. I cannot assent to a place of certainty about that which I cannot know, and about that which has crushed me under its weight all my life, without my consent, and without my knowing. I cannot accept that which has silently strangled my essence, now that I know it. I cannot grasp and acquiesce to the slow rot of my soul, for my flesh refuses in its every movement to comprehend. I cannot, and will not, sacrifice myself for a jealous God who punishes me to confirm its own strength. I refuse.”

The Adversary bristled, its wings rose, and it showed its jagged teeth at this last statement by M., growing in size before him. Its eyes became fully enlarged and illuminated. A red glow seeped from its mouth. It raised its claws out to M., but M. did not budge; its wings spread out around M., scraping along the ceiling of the porch, but M. persisted in his steadfast posture; it scraped its hooves along the rotting wood of the porch, but M. held fast.

With a grunt, The Adversary settled, and with an absurd look of dejection on its face, it muttered, “Then this conversation is over. I cannot understand—”

“No,” M. replied defiantly, taking a step towards the beast, “It has only just begun. Shedding the limits imposed by the walls of absolute reason, faith, and nihilism does not dictate that we give up or give in to quietism or that we choose to quit our dialogue—but that we push forth, for the sake of not just ourselves, but for all that will follow us. It dictates not meaninglessness in the face of this absurdity—but a different meaning than these: it dictates that we assert our meaning, as humans, nothing more or less, and that we do it lucidly.”

The Adversary, flustered and put out, exclaimed in a high, screeching voice, as it raised its claws to cover its face, “Why!?!... if there is reason, faith... and nihilism...” its voice shook with uncertainty, “should we get rid of them for this... ‘simplicity and lucidity’ you speak of?... How can this be?” It shuffled its hooves and grasped in the air for something to hold.

M., with a feeling of complete clarity, responded, “Because we cannot disobey our essential nature of care—so we must, as Sisyphus and as all those before us, roll our rock up the hill once again, and hope that our path will help others in their own. We must enter our condition and master it. And we must do this from a place of understanding and illumination.... And maybe then we will catch a glimpse of that which you say requires faith; but our glimpse will spring from our own, simple, and authentic view—one that does not negate condition for the hereafter, but which celebrates the now for itself. One that does not deny the pleasures and pain of existence, but one that celebrates existence in its full nature. This, then, is the hope of the poet and the thinker, who, detached from the sun of life, rebels against the paradox of existence while carrying it along with him, and asserts himself in the face of the void. Thus, he creates a life worth living for not only himself but perhaps even for others. This is my ‘faith,’ and this is my future. With this wisdom I will go forth.”

With this final proclamation of life, The Adversary—the strangler of essence, self, and hope, and the bringer of death—leaned back in sheer terror of M., and fell backwards off the porch, being engulfed in shadow.

M. looked around him. The beauty of the sun beginning to rise behind the hills on the horizon crept forward and into his heart, and with a final sigh he stepped out into the dawn, open and willing to embrace the possibility of the life before him. “Today I close one door,” he thought, “however an infinite many stretch out before me.” And so the tender indifference of the world opened up before him and created the infinite possibility of an affirmed life, and more of it to come. He was free.

In the distance, unknown to M., a battered traveler lay amongst a pile of stones. He has wandered, now he rests. Despite his travels in the night, he might even be called happy.

A new day rises. The Dawn sheds its light.

End.

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